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SENSITIVE
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DEPT FOR EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM KDEM GG
SUBJECT: LABOR PARTY ACTIVIST ARRESTED, NATELASHVILI CLAIMS
POLITICAL PERSECUTION

REF: TBILISI 1273

¶1. (U) On July 25, Georgian police arrested Labor Party activist Archil Benidze on charges of money laundering. Chairman of the Labor Party Shalva Natelashvili held a press brief where he denounced the arrest as "political persecution by the government." Natelashvili alleged the arrest was engineered to obtain "false evidence" against him to be used in arresting him as well. News reports claimed the Prosecutor General's office (PGO) has taped conversations between Natelashvili and an associate of deceased oligarch Badri Patarkatsishvili, regarding money transfers to Georgia. Benidze was on the party list, and was Labor's majoritarian candidate in the Aspindza district of the Samstkhе-Javakheti region, during the May parliamentary elections. He is not a well-known public figure.

¶2. (SBU) Deputy Foreign Minister Giga Bokeria informed the Ambassador of the arrest in advance. Anticipating Natelashvili's charge of political persecution, Bokeria said there was ample evidence of money laundering. The Embassy also inquired about the charges with the PGO, which provided Post the following explanation. Begin Text:

On 30 November 2007 the criminal investigation was initiated by the Investigation Unit of Constitutional Security Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MOIA) of Georgia Under Article 194 Section 2 (a, b) of the Criminal Code of Georgia (money laundering).

On 26 July 2008, Mr. Archil Benidze (member of Labour Party of Georgia) was charged with Article 194 Section 2 (a, c) of the Criminal Code of Georgia (Edition in force as for 12 April 2008) and on the same day Tbilisi City Court issued an Order for the application of pre-trial detention as a measure of constraint against Mr. Benidze. The case is still under an investigation.

End text.

¶3. (SBU) Comment: Natelashvili has submitted letters (emailed to EUR/CARC) to the Embassy requesting political asylum and alleging persecution by the government. Natelashvili has also alleged the government is pressuring him with threat of arrest to enter Parliament, ostensibly to "legitimize" the body. Natelashvili has recently held several press briefings before the MOIA and PGO, where he has denounced the two offices and claimed he would not allow his party members to testify on pending investigations (such as Benidze's). Benidze's arrest comes at the same time as a New Rightist activist was charged with attempted bribery, and Eka Beselia's son awaits trial (reftel). End comment.

TEFFT